Summary

Land with a Good View
What Can Be Learnt from the Economic and Demographic Success of the Oldenburger Münsterland

Most German rural areas heavily suffer from the consequences of demographic change. Low birth rates and out-migration of the young result in a radical ageing of society. The economies lack new ideas and investors, which often leads to high unemployment. The debt-ridden localities seldom possess the means to sustain or modernise their infrastructure. Schools are merged, shops and banks close, and tax revenues decrease.

However, some model regions, which are able to defy this trend and to show evidence of their future demographic and economic strength, do exist. One of them is the Oldenburger Münsterland in western Lower Saxony. Up until the dawn of the twentieth century, the region was penniless and cut off by vast marsh areas. In fact, it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that the people in the districts Cloppenburg and Vechta found a new basis for their economy. Today, the Oldenburger Münsterland with its roughly 300,000 inhabitants has grown to a downright booming region – almost unnoticed by the rest of Germany.

Unlike most other rural areas, the Oldenburger Münsterland can count on a migration surplus and birth rates that surpass mortality rates. In Germany, a country with few children (1.37 children per woman), the district Cloppenburg reaches the one-of-a-kind score of 1.74 children per woman; in the neighbouring Vechta the rate is 1.57 (2007). The population is distinctly younger than the country’s average, and it has grown by twelve per cent since 1995. During the same period, Lower Saxony as a whole has gained 2.5 per cent, while the figure for the whole of Germany amounts to only 0.5. Since 2003, the German population has even been shrinking.
In the age groups of the 30- to 65-year-olds, the population pyramids of the Oldenburger Münsterland and Germany are rather similar. Crucial differences can be identified in the younger and older cohorts: thanks to the traditional abundance of children, the younger age groups are relatively strong in the Oldenburger Münsterland. An overall ageing of society, as is the case in the whole of Germany, is not yet foreseeable.

Even more surprising are economic indicators of the region: the economic upsurge of the last three years has been three times as high as in the rest of the country. The employment rate has risen by 26 per cent since 1995 – the German average being less than four per cent. Unemployment is significantly lower than the national average, while the employment rate of women is higher – something unusual for a rural area.

The core of the success of the Oldenburger Münsterland is agriculture, which accounts for only one per cent of GDP in Germany. However, the people of the Oldenburger Münsterland do not solely live off agricultural primary production, where hardly any jobs can be created nowadays, but off hundreds of up- and downstream companies in agricultural and foodstuff
industries. A closed value chain has developed, connecting fodder production and cattle breeding, slaughterhouses and meat processing, mechanical engineering and packing industry, agricultural and foodstuff technology to each other and to the relevant regional service suppliers. About one third of the local workforce is employed in this sector, with the result that the region has recently been termed the “Silicon Valley of Agrarian Technology.” Also in quantitative terms, the region has attracted a remarkable share of agricultural production: while less than 0.4 per cent of the German population live in Cloppenburg and Vechta, every eleventh porker, every fifth laying hen, and every third German turkey live their short lives in the region.

Employment steadily grows in the Oldenburger Münsterland

In the districts Vechta and Cloppenburg, the number of employed persons has grown by 26 per cent in the eleven years from 1995 to 2006. Of all rural areas, only the district of Dingolfing-Landau in Bavaria has witnessed a comparably rapid growth (22 per cent). On the contrary, the biggest employment losses took place in the districts of Oberspreewald-Lausitz in Brandenburg (-30.2 per cent) and Uecker-Randow in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (-26 per cent).
The success of the Oldenburger Münsterland did, however, not occur by accident. This conclusion can already be drawn from the fact that the development is so untypical for rural areas. The Berlin Institute for Population and Development has analysed the factors behind this economic and demographic success story by means of data analyses, interviews, and a comprehensive population survey. The following questions have been pursued: Is the environment in the Oldenburger Münsterland equally friendly to families and businesses and, in case of yes, to whom can this be attributed? Does the abundance of children make a positive contribution to the economy – or is the opposite the case? Finally, are there any lessons to be learnt for other rural areas and is it possible to copy parts of the formula for success?

For sure, family, diligence, work ethics, attachment to home, solidarity, and religion play a big role in the Oldenburger Münsterland. The previously poor farmers, isolated by geography and religion due to their Catholic faith in Protestant surroundings, had to care for themselves for a long time. In their dire straits, the people learned to make best of what they had. Those without a sense of solidarity and teamwork either had no chance or were forced to emigrate. Out of cooperation in small units – families, neighbourhoods, and village communities – social and economic networks developed, which continue to exist even today. This comparatively homogenous society has no problems defining itself on the basis of common values and goals.
Cloppenburg boasts the highest number of children per woman

In 2007, the average German woman had 1.37 children, although differences at the district level were high. The Oldenburger Münsterland in western Lower Saxony, with the districts Cloppenburg and Vechta, reached the peak with 1.74 and 1.57 children per woman, respectively. The weakest scores were obtained by districts such as Passau, Würzburg, and Heidelberg, with less than one child per woman.

It is mutual respect, trust to one another, and commitment to the region that form the basis of an exceptionally innovative and successful middle class, which today boasts numerous companies operating worldwide. Almost all of them have been born out of village cooperation, which has always had a focus on regional economic linkages, bringing together producers and subcontractors in the area. Village smiths have thus developed into global producers of agricultural machinery, while poultry traders have become large food corporations. Yet, both of them have managed not to lose touch with their bases.
When yesterday’s recipes meet today’s challenges

The late development from an agrarian to a modern society has proven advantageous. Old values such as family and homeland, down-to-earthness and religion, honorary work and club activities – considered outdated elsewhere – have survived in the Oldenburger Münsterland. Now, due to demographic change and a constant reduction of responsibilities assumed by the state, these values are again regarded as modern and future-oriented, as new means against societal deficiencies. They merely bear new labels: social capital, civil society, *Solidargemeinschaft*, or *Mehrgenerationshaus*. Indeed, the city of Cloppenburg with its mere 32,000 inhabitants is home to no fewer than 180 registered clubs and associations, which translates into more than 80 per cent of the people being members of at least one of a vast variety of organisations and institutions. What is more, 19 per cent of the respondents live in a household with more than two generations under the same roof – in Germany this is only the case for one per cent of the population.
Voluntary work is a part of life

A large portion of the respondents in the Oldenburger Münsterland are already doing voluntary work – more than Germans on average. In addition, only few respondents would reject further activities. The people in the region grow up with a wealth of clubs and organisations around them, which fulfil the functions of social and economic networks.

The survey of the Berlin Institute shows that this social cohesion has an effect on birth rates: reconciling family and career is much easier in an environment where multiple generations live relatively close to each other with parents actively providing care for grandparents who, in turn, care for their grandchildren. This is one reason for the fact that the desire for children in the Oldenburger Münsterland continues to be exceptionally high. On the other hand, the abundance of children forms a good basis for lively communities and constant tax revenues, while at the same time securing jobs in the services sector. As the labour market develops positively, few young people feel the need to migrate. This system is a closed one, and is strongly associated with high quality of life among the people in the Oldenburger Münsterland. The inhabitants’ positive self-perception encourages them to participate in the community and to contribute to the development of their region.
Desire for children constantly high

Only every fourth German mother or father wants further children. This runs contrary to the Oldenburger Münsterland, where more than half of the parents would readily have more children. At the same time, mothers express their desire for children more clearly.

The analysis carried out by the Berlin Institute allows drawing some important conclusions on the future prospects of rural areas in a shrinking society, where out-migration from the countryside tends to become stronger. Rural areas are thus increasingly going to lose population. Sustainable demographic development seems to be possible only in regions with certain endogenous potentials, such as an attractive nature with openings for tourism, agriculture with exceptional value-added chains, or new lines of business that do not solely rely on the proximity of metropolises. Above all, these regions require active and creative inhabitants with self-confidence and new ideas. Rural areas depend on people, who are able to combine and fulfil social and economic interests – far more than urban centres, which can provide their citizens with public services more easily and cost-efficiently.
The success of the Oldenburger Münsterland can thus not be transferred one-to-one to other regions. Underlying principles of the success story – social and family networks, closed economic value-added chains, positive self-perception – are pre-requisites of development elsewhere, too. Acknowledgement of the fact that development in rural areas is impossible without a certain extent of dedication of the local people could indicate which German regions are in a position to attain economic and demographic stability.

Further information on the study “Land with a Good View” can be found on the internet under www.berlin-institut.org. For questions and interviews please contact Dr. Reiner Klingholz (phone 00 49-30-31 01 75 60) or Iris Hoßmann (phone 00 49-30-31 01 68 35).

This research project was sponsored by

GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG
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